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GROUP'S SUCCESS IN FORGING UNITY IS A BEACON OF HOPE FOR THE WORLD

Asean's strategic diplomacy underpins regional stability

Try imagining a world where the Middle East is at peace. The thought seems almost inconceivable.

Imagine a world where Israel and Palestine, two nations splintered from one piece of territory, live harmoniously. Impossible? This is what Malaysia and Singapore accomplished. After an acrimonious divorce in 1965, they live together in peace.

Imagine a world where Egypt, the most populous Islamic country in the Middle East, emerges as a stable and prosperous democracy. Impossible?

Then ask yourself how it is that Indonesia, the most populous Islamic country in South-east Asia — with more than four times as many people as Egypt — has emerged as a beacon of democracy. Egypt and Indonesia both suffered from corruption. And both experienced decades of military rule, under Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Suharto in Indonesia.

Yet, Egypt remains under military rule while Indonesia has emerged as the leading democracy in the Islamic world. What explains the difference?

The one-word answer is Asean. The Association of South-east Asian Nations's success in practising strategic diplomacy over the past 50 years has been one of the most undersold stories of our time. If one were looking around the world to find the most

promising region for international co-operation, South-east Asia would have been at the bottom of the list.

Home to 240 million Muslims, 130 million Christians, 140 million Buddhists and seven million Hindus, it is the most diverse region in the world.

In the 1960s, when Asean was formed, the region had garnered a reputation as "the Balkans of Asia", due to its geopolitical rivalries and pervasive disputes.

Asean leaders at the 30th Asean summit in Manila in April. The regional grouping's camaraderie has defused many potential crises in the region and its strategic culture has infected the larger Asia-Pacific region. PHOTO: REUTERS



Today, Asean is more important than ever. It has become more than an important neutral zone for great-power engagement. Its success in forging unity in diversity is a beacon of hope for our troubled world.

As the Asean dynamic gained momentum and the organisation moved towards creating hundreds of multilateral meetings a year, the South-east Asian region became more closely connected. Webs of networks developed in different areas of cooperation, from trade to defence.

Asean camaraderie has defused many potential crises in the region.

One shining example of the success of Asean's strategic diplomacy occurred in 2007.

In August that year, the world was shocked when monks in Yangon were shot during street protests after the unexpected removal of fuel subsidies led to a drastic overnight rise in commodity prices.

Since Asean had admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997, there was pressure on the members to make a statement criticising these shootings. Myanmar had two options: It could have vetoed an Asean joint statement or disassociated itself from such a statement.

Then there would have been a statement among the remaining nine countries criticising Myanmar. Many, including the nine other Asean foreign ministers, expected this to be the outcome. To their surprise, Myanmar's foreign minister, Mr Nyan Win, agreed that all 10 countries, including Myanmar, should endorse the statement.

This was a truly remarkable decision — the statement said that the Asean foreign ministers "were appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used and demanded that the Myanmar government immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators".

In short, even when there were sharp disagreements between Myanmar and its fellow Asean countries, Myanmar decided that sticking with Asean was preferable to opting out.

Clearly, the Asean policy of engaging the military regime in Myanmar with strategic diplomacy had succeeded. This story of engagement almost reads as a foil to the European Union's disastrous policy of isolating Syria.

Asean's ability to foster peace extends outside its member states.

In an era of growing geopolitical pessimism, when many leading geopolitical thinkers predict rising competition and tension between great powers — especially between the United States and China — Asean has created an indispensable diplomatic platform that regularly brings all the great powers together.

Within Asean, a culture of peace has evolved as a result of imbibing the Indonesian custom of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* (consultation and consensus).

Now, Asean has begun to share this culture of peace with the larger Asia-Pacific region. When tensions rise between China and Japan and their leaders find it difficult to speak to each other, Asean provides a face-saving platform and the right setting to restart the conversation.

In particular, Asean has facilitated

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China's peaceful rise by generating a framework that moderates aggressive impulses. In short, Asean's strategic culture has infected the larger Asia-Pacific region.

One of the miracles of the Asia-Pacific is that significant great-power conflict has been prevented, even though there have been enormous shifts of power among the great nations in the region. Of course, the rea-

sons for this lack of conflict are complex. Asean's neutrality, which helps the organisation retain its centrality in the region, is one factor in keeping the region stable and peaceful.

This is why it is important that in the growing Sino-US geopolitical competition, both sides should treat Asean as a delicate Ming vase that could easily break.

US and Chinese interests will both suffer if Asean is damaged or

destroyed — delicacy in dealing with Asean is critical for both sides.

Asean is far from perfect — its many flaws have been well documented, especially in the Anglo-Saxon media.

It never progresses in a linear fashion, often moving like a crab, taking two steps forward, one step backwards and one step sideways.

Viewed over a short period, progress is hard to see. But despite its many imperfections, in a longer view,

Asean's forward progress has been tangible.

In these interesting times, Asean's policies and practices of strategic diplomacy deserve appreciation and study by the global community.

EAST ASIA FORUM

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